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THE WORK OF MRS. HUMPHRY WARD.

BY HAMILTON W. MABIE.

MRS. HUMPHRY WARD was predestined to seriousness of mood by the traditions and temper of her family; she has become an artist by resolute achievement. In ability of the most substantial English quality she is pre-eminent among the women of her generation who are dealing with the arts of expression; she has a high degree of concentration, that faculty which focuses all the forces of the nature on one line of endeavor; and she has the pertinacity of mind which turns these forces to the highest account and evokes their finest qualities. Her work is saturated with character in its thoroughness of structure, its firm knitting together of all the threads of story, its scrupulous care for detail, its delicate precision of diction. In all these things the Arnold ethical energy is worked out and its ethical passion expressed. The restraint and moderation of statement, the occasional elaboration of qualifying phrases, the range of allusion, the ease with which the social side of a ripe and highly developed society is conveyed: these qualities suggest without intruding the wide and generous culture which lies behind Mrs. Ward's work and gives it breadth of outlook and a quality of largeness.

These elements of possible strength and also of possible weak-

ness have been present in Mrs. Ward's novels from the beginning; what has been uncertain has been the predominance of the artistic over the ethical instinct, the subordination of the didactic to the artistic impulse.

The problem of artistic success in Mrs. Ward's case has been further complicated by her deep interest in sociological questions and conditions. If the compulsion of duty has not led her to take a leading part in those manifold practical endeavors to secure the betterment of social conditions which show the play of the modern conscience, it is clear that her interest in these matters has been quick and sincere. Hardly less deep has been her interest in those problems and changes of thought touching the meaning of life and man's relation to the Infinite, which have tormented and stimulated the men and women of the last thirty years. Such interests reveal the elevation of Mrs. Ward's nature and the dignity and disinterestedness of her mind; but they do not settle the question of her ability to practice with high success the difficult art of fiction.

Nor, it may be added, does the favorable judgment of two men of such eminence as Mr. Gladstone and Count Tolstoi. Mr. Gladstone was a devout lover of some kinds of literature; but his interest in books was primarily that of a student, a religious thinker and a statesman. Count Tolstoi is, all things considered, the foremost man of letters now living; a great writer; and, what is more important, one of the greatest masters of fiction who have yet appeared in any literature. If Count Tolstoi had declared, while he was writing "*Anna Karénina*," that Mrs. Ward was "the greatest living English novelist" his judgment would have been as nearly final as the judgment of a man at the summit of his profession ever can be; but the judgment of the author of "*Resurrection*"—a reformer of the most ardent temper—is less weighty and decisive.

In short, there has been a good deal of uncertainty from the beginning with regard to the rank of Mrs. Ward as a novelist and the permanent value and charm of her work as literature; and the judgment of eminent men who were deeply engaged in the causes for which she cared and profoundly interested in the questions which stirred her imagination, has never been accepted as conclusive. Her ability has been frankly recognized, but many readers have reserved their judgment of the quality of her fiction

until it should be made clear that she was writing fiction for its own sake, and not using it as a highly effective instrument of social amelioration.

It is fifteen years since the publication of "Robert Elsmere" brought Mrs. Ward into sudden prominence. A very unpretentious story for children, "Milly and Olly," and a love story, "Miss Bretherton," had attracted no attention and gave slight indication of the remarkable energy and intensity which Mrs. Ward was on the point of revealing. The translation of Amiel's "*Journal Intime*," which appeared a little later, was of such admirable quality that it effected a real transference of thought and feeling from one language to another, and added a work of deep and permanent interest to the literature with which this generation lives and by which it has been deeply influenced. The introduction gave Amiel a welcome which was at once gracious and, in a rare degree, interpretative of his temper and spirit. There were moods in the meditations of the Swiss professor which were more significant of his temperament and his age than were his thoughts, and these moods Mrs. Ward divined and defined with sympathetic insight and skill.

The appearance of "Robert Elsmere" in 1888 was happily timed with a notable and deeply interesting stage of spiritual experience through which many men and women of religious temper were passing. That there was a note of spiritual autobiography in it is beyond question. That note had a vibratory quality, and in all parts of the English-speaking world its echoes were audible. Rarely has a book dealing with a purely spiritual crisis found so many readers. Such books often produce profound effects, but they usually attract the few and repel the many. "Robert Elsmere" became in a few months the most popular novel of its day. Probably no novel of recent times has been so widely and seriously discussed. The secret of its popularity was not far to seek: it translated a crisis of the mind and spirit into dramatic terms; it was a moving and deeply interesting story. To the few it was a study of a phase of contemporary thought; to the many it was a novel whose intensity of feeling laid a spell on the imagination. That intensity gave it momentary compulsion, but limited its value as a work of art. Full of sincere feeling and revealing ability of a very high order, this striking study of the psychology of the close of the nineteenth century is likely to be

forgotten because it was too close to the experience it described to give that experience breadth and finality of expression; it was the very able book of an hour.

"David Grieve" opened with a charming picture of childhood, contained some admirably drawn portraits and was full of interesting incidents; but there were two distinct stories in it and they were not perfectly blended; they betrayed a tendency to run their separate courses independently of one another. In "Marcella" there was a deeper unity and a marked advance in dramatic power. The story had a noble lift of spirit; it lacked neither structural order nor distinction of style; but it did lack humor and lightness of touch. "Sir George Tressady," in which the fortunes of Marcella were still further related, was distinctly below the level of its predecessor in interest and power. "The Story of Bessie Costrell," which soon followed, was less ambitious and elaborate, but, up to the time of its publication, was the most successful piece of fiction Mrs. Ward had written. It was full of ease, naturalness, simplicity. It was not, however, a pleasant story, and it has not received the attention it deserves. It stands alone among Mrs. Ward's earlier novels as a piece of pure fiction; it states no problem; it simply tells a story.

In "Helbeck of Bannisdale" Mrs. Ward took up the religious problem from another side and, by a striking contrast of temperaments, brought its tremendous significance as a factor in human experience into clear light. The novel was not, however, convincing; it was full of thought and there were dramatic passages of great power in it, but it left the reader cold.

With the publication of "Eleanor" Mrs. Ward entered upon another stage in her growth as an artist. In that firmly constructed and finely written novel the didactic element is dissolved, so to speak, in a richer and more penetrating artistic impulse. The power of moral portraiture in the story is of a very high order, but it is not more subtle or convincing than the power of investing the movement of the plot and the personality of the actors with moving and compelling human interest; while the background of the story is sketched with an art which makes the exquisite Italian landscape a distinct and essential element in the story. Nowhere else has Mrs. Ward more clearly revealed the sensitiveness of her imagination and the opulence of her style; opulence in the sense of richness of resource rather than

richness of diction; for the specific qualities of the descriptive passages in "Eleanor" are delicacy of shading, subtle uses of words of color and form, true and sensitive perceptions of light and shadow.

"Lady Rose's Daughter" is, like its predecessor, a study of temperament, but it is in no sense a problem novel. The old and ever-present problem of the reaction of the individual against the over-pressure of organized social traditions, standards and laws is stated afresh; but that problem, in some form, is the substance of all drama and fiction that have any claim to be accepted as art. In ceasing to deal directly with ethical and social questions Mrs. Ward has not ceased to use her art for high purposes and in a profoundly serious spirit; she has simply brought the teacher and the artist in her own nature into true relations. There are no more profound or convincing teachers than the dramatists and novelists; but their power lies in the fact that they penetrate so deeply into the laws of life and character that the ethical facts and truths rise into view because they are uncovered, not because they are deliberately sought. There is no teacher so compelling as life if life be really seen and nobly portrayed.

In withdrawing her mind from specific problems and fastening it upon the central problem Mrs. Ward's work has gained immensely in ethical significance. The immediate ethical impression produced by a novel of artistic power may be less than that produced by a novel of definite moral propagandism, but the ultimate effect is far more profound and lasting. It is safe to predict that "Anna Karénina" will be teaching its terrible lesson long after "Resurrection" has been forgotten. It is true, as Mrs. Ward has said, that "the artist is no worse, but better, for stepping outside the limitations of his art occasionally for the sake of social service"; but it is also true that each man states the truth he sees most clearly and influences his generation most deeply by working along the line of his genius and using the language of his temperament; and the genius and temperament of the artist commit him as finally to art as his language, as the genius of the preacher commits him to the language of ethical or religious appeal. There are probably a thousand preachers to every artist, and society sorely needs the teachers whose special office is to keep alive the feeling for the beauty of truth.

In "Lady Rose's Daughter" Mrs. Ward is not less serious than she was in "Robert Elsmere." Her seriousness is, indeed, one of her prime qualities as a writer. She has never trifled with her art nor shaped it to meet the taste of the hour. She has honored it and herself by high conscientiousness; by the self-imposed discipline of severe and exacting workmanship; by resolutely following the lead of her inspirations. A worker of such integrity of impulse and achievement deserves the most candid and searching criticism; the high character of her work evokes and compels it. She has nothing in common with the novelists who make a trade of a popular form of writing, and are content to assist the large class of readers who are bent on making as little use of time as possible.

"Lady Rose's Daughter" is a serious story; but, unlike some of its predecessors, it bears slight evidence of weight of hand or sign of toil. The prime defect in Mrs. Ward's early writing was the sense of work rather than of play which pervaded it. There was an absence of that ease of mind which one feels in the earlier stories of George Eliot and of George Sand; that delightful consciousness of resources that fly to the writer's aid as the birds fly to an open window when a familiar voice calls them, and bring the spaciousness and freedom of the open sky with them. Art is work of the hardest kind in the process of accomplishment, but it must seem like the play of the mind when it comes into the hands of the reader. In Mrs. Ward's early work one was conscious of a great effort, to recall Ruskin, as well as a great power; in her later work one is conscious only of the power.

It is a matter of indifference how much or how little Mrs. Ward was aided in writing "Lady Rose's Daughter" by a record of real experience; such records have been the common property of the imagination since literature began; they belong to any who can divine their significance and breathe the breath of life into them. What is important is the reality with which Mrs. Humphry Ward has invested the central figure in her story, the skill with which she has built the facts into English life and worked out the problem in terms of English character. In no other story has she approached the brilliancy and vivacity of "Lady Rose's Daughter"; the easy touch-and-go of familiar talk, the delicate but sharply defined contrasts of character in appearance, bear-

ing and speech; the interplay and modification of character by character. In lightness of touch, variety of mood and temperament, and in ease of mood this story marks Mrs. Ward's highest achievement. In no other novel has she given so many evidences of the possession of the original qualities of the novelist: knowledge of life, dramatic power, sympathy of imagination, humor, and the gift of pathos.

In an earlier story Mrs. Ward describes one of her characters as having worked through a very rich culture to great simplicity. Simplicity in the sense of dealing with few objects at a time and dealing with them directly Mrs. Ward has not achieved and is not likely to achieve. She deals by preference, probably by necessity, with complex situations and characters; she is attracted, as a rule, by those problems of temperament which are complicated by the presence of many and often conflicting elements; she moves easily in a society which has become highly sophisticated by reason of the long and many-sided experience of life which it represents. One looks for complexity rather than simplicity in Mrs. Ward's stories; and no small part of their interest lies in the sense of a full, rich, ripe social life which they convey; the sense of a living organism which is stored with the accumulated experiences of a long past. George Eliot dealt with this complexity of character in the most mature and elaborate of her studies of society, "*Middlemarch*"; and while the lines of her portraiture are more sharply defined than those of Mrs. Ward the beauty and richness of social life in an old civilization are more vividly conveyed by the author of "*Lady Rose's Daughter*."

Of late years three or four novelists of distinction have dealt habitually with men and women who are the products of a high degree of social or intellectual culture, and whose minds have been so overlaid with many kinds of knowledge that they have lost the power, in many cases, of moving directly to an end. This extreme sophistication induces, in the end, a kind of secondary character; it substitutes refinement of method for original force, sensitiveness for power, and the faculty of seeing all the conceivable qualifications and limitations of action for the power of acting strongly and decisively. As a rule, the novelists who have yielded to the attraction of these men and women of secondary rather than primary impulse and energy have reflected in style both the refinement and the subtlety of the highly sophisticated tempera-

ment. They have delighted in elaborate qualifications, in the most elusive distinctions, in the obscurity produced by pressing too many things on the mind at the same time. They have gained a certain delicacy of diction and deftness of structure at the expense of clearness, vital interest and compelling power. Fiction of this kind has often been deeply interesting as psychology, but has been vexatious and irritating as literature. When the novelist cares more for processes of mind than for the play of character as it affects and is affected by events he gains refinement at the cost of vital power; and that is a price which no writer of fiction can afford to pay.

"Lady Rose's Daughter" is an admirable example of the fiction which portrays complexity of motive and temperament without loss of dramatic intensity. The study of character is subtle in its penetration and refinement of method, but the movement of the story is never impeded nor is it too heavily weighted with definition and reflection. The current runs deep but it flows steadily and, at times, swiftly; and the reader is never caught in an eddy which seems to have no outlet. There are, here and there, as the story progresses, passages which might be safely omitted, and the reader feels as if he had come upon a family tradition when he meets Marcus Aurelius at the close of the story; but the novel never relaxes its hold on the imagination, and the ending loses nothing of moral dignity by reason of the presence of the greatest of the Roman moralists.

In a word, Mrs. Ward succeeds where nearly all the psychological novelists fail: she lays bare the most complicated situations and the most highly sophisticated temperaments without sacrificing that vital interest which is the heart and soul of fiction.

Her style has always been adequate to the very considerable tasks she has imposed upon it. It has been capacious enough to receive and to express the most serious thought, and it has been sufficiently clear and distinct to register very delicate shades of meaning and to convey the impetus of deep and impetuous movements of events. As she has gone on Mrs. Ward's style has gained in distinction; it is not only firm and sure, but it is touched throughout with that fine quality, individual and artistic, which imparts both dignity and charm. It never lacks restraint and yet it is rarely cold; and there are moments when it fills with the joy of life and grows eloquent with the beauty of the world.

If "Lady Rose's Daughter" contained no other characters the portraiture of Julie Le Breton and Lady Henry would make it a notable piece of fiction. The two women who are in a sense the heroines of the story are drawn with a skill at once delicate and firm, which fills them with life expressed in every form that marked individuality can take on; while the inevitable conflict between them is described with an insight into its moral success which gives it a tragic dignity. If Julie Le Breton be a modern rendering of Mlle. de Lespinasse the boldness and sincerity of the art which set her moving among a throng of people, attracted or repelled by her, but never indifferent to her, is as impressive and convincing as if she had been fashioned out of hand. To draw successfully a woman so circumstanced and of such temperamental force there was needed the very unusual woman who is neither afraid of the passional side of life nor blind to its tremendous ethical significance. That she was equal to such a task shows how well equipped Mrs. Ward is in clear objective vision as well as in subjective feeling; how admirably poised she is between the power of impulse and the claims of reason. No woman whose moral standards were primarily conventional could have understood the temperament of Julie Le Breton, and no woman whose perception of moral values was uncertain or blurred could have solved the problem of such a temperament. A woman of uncertain moral insight might have stated the problem; only a woman of clear moral insight could have solved it.

HAMILTON W. MABIE.